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Published in:
Politics and Religion in the New Century

Publication date:
2009

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Religious truth in a globalising world: new challenges to philosophy of religion

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Introduction

The current situation for religion in Western societies is a very ambivalent one and therefore raises many new and unexpected questions, not in the least for philosophy of religion. The well-known secularisation thesis, according to which religions would become a more and more marginal phenomenon as scientific reason disenchanted the world, is no longer the dominant paradigm. On the contrary, against all odds there is not only a growing interest in all kinds of religious phenomena in many highly secularised societies, but many people moreover seem to be especially intrigued by those religious manifestations that have withstood the wave of secularisation and rationalisation during the second half of the 20th century. All kinds of spirituality, New Age and esotericism included, are hot issues; there are waiting lists for people who want to spend some time in a monastery to share the life of the monks; hundreds of thousands take part in the World Youth Days; faith healing sessions are widely attended; new religious movements, especially evangelical and spiritual ones, are booming; people build their own house altars with images of Jesus and Buddha, as well as with a Jewish menorah. However, this obvious increase of interest in religious matters in general does not involve a more positive attitude towards the traditional churches, which would be expressed by: an increase of the number of people attending divine services, a greater willingness to

accept the moral and doctrinal teachings of the Church, to observe its sacramental rules, and by a rise in the number of vocations.

This ambivalent interest in religion is determined to a large extent by two attitudes characteristic of contemporary postmodern people, viz. 'bricolage' and consumerism. Bricolage refers to the fact that the religious convictions and practices of many people are the result of tinkering, of constructing and reconstructing elements of various religious traditions into an individual religious patchwork, as the example given above illustrates. Whether or not this 'bricolage' is successful does not depend on an objective standard, for example the doctrine of the Church or religious community, but only on subjective preferences, on whether one feels good with them. Consumerism stands for the attitude of people, behaving with regard to religion in a similar way as consumers in a supermarket: in the offer of religious commodities they pick and choose what they expect to best meet their personal needs. Besides, the religious supermarket is only one market out of many in the enormous shopping mall of modern culture, all of them trying to seduce the consumer to buy lifestyle goods from them. It does not make sense to consult a consumers' magazine in lifestyle affairs to find help in making the 'right' choice, the best value for money. Again, this shows that there is no objective standard to orient people in their lives. Therefore, postmodern individuals are constantly constructing the content and meaning of their lives, gaining information about whether there is anything attractive in the latest trends, desperately hoping to find recognition for their lifestyle from other people, and always afraid of being out of vogue.

Although the 'bricoleurs' and the consumerists still dominate the religious scene, their way of handling religious 'commodities' has become confused by a relatively new factor, whose impact is growing fast, viz. globalisation. It is obvious that globalisation penetrates all sectors of society, and has a major impact on all kinds of religious and

non-religious worldviews, values and practices. First, there are the effects of the increase of migration on Western societies; mainly as a result of the influx of non-Western citizens. The number of non-Christian communities of faith, as well as the number of their members, has increased considerably; the rise of Islam is the most striking example of this development. Due to this same migration process the internal diversity of Christian communities of faith has grown dramatically; we gradually become aware of what it means that Christianity is indeed a world religion, and that the Western, highly secularised, 'bricolagist' and consumerist type of Christianity is only one of its ramifications, and not even the largest one. Secondly, there is the fact that the media and the consequences of global politics confront us with norms and values that diverge much more than before from the Western way of life that we are familiar with. The media shows us almost daily images that make us aware of the fact that our way of looking at ourselves and the world is but a minority viewpoint. As far as global politics is concerned, Western societies experience these considerable differences in norms and values in practice when they try to export their democratic, tolerant, liberal etc. way of life to other continents through so called peace keeping and peace enforcement operations, often with little success.

These effects of globalisation, which are not expected to come to an end soon, confront not only Christian faithful, but also secular people in the Western world with changing quantitative proportions between communities, new worldviews, values, moral standards, and practices that diverge substantially from, until recently, the generally accepted ones. They affect the self evidence of our ideas and behaviours, and consequently raise many new questions in the fields of social sciences, law, education, but also philosophy of religion. Until recently, the real differences in Western societies between the most common ways of life were still limited, because Catholicism, Protestantism, Humanism, Liberalism and Socialism, in spite of all their controversies, belonged

to the same Western culture. They had a long history in common, understood and respected each others 'ideological' language, and had each from its perspective contributed to the advancement of (post)modern society, including the values of religious freedom and tolerance. However, due to the process of globalisation, a dramatic qualitative and quantitative increase in the variety of ways of life has occurred, because their proponents to a large extent do not share the same history, do not speak the same language, do not naturally agree with some of the basic values of postmodern society. Especially because these differences not only keep us busy on a theoretical level, but also manifest themselves practically in our everyday life; the question then arises as to what all these different ways of life stand for and how they can relate to each other in a peaceful and respectful way? To give only a few examples: our idea of the role of women in public life meets with the opposition of people who see the care for the house and the family as the primary task of women. The recent change in the legislation of several Western countries in order to allow gay people to get married and to adopt children is considered by numerous people as undermining the very substance of marriage and the family. The way in which we treat elderly people, who gave birth to us and from whose past efforts we still abundantly benefit, is nothing less than appalling for many people from non-Western countries. We easily interpret the wearing of a scarf by Muslim girls and women as a sign of sexual and religious oppression; it might as well be considered as a protest against the excrescences of an over-sexed Western society. In sum, some of our basic values, religious and secular ones, considered by us as important achievements of our society, are queried by other people, often of a non-Western origin, but who nevertheless live next door: they do not consider them as a sign of liberation and progress, but as one of moral decline. They moreover are convinced that they don't have to be tolerant with regard to these opinions and practices, because in their view they are

simply wrong. Confronted with these phenomena, a critical question can be asked to Western society—isn't its self-proclaimed multiculturalism, according to which the variety of ways of life (including more traditional ones) is not only tolerated but even welcomed, at odds with its implicit dominant credo that, in order to be accepted as a full member of this society, you *have to be* individualistic, emancipated, secular, sexually liberated. And further that if you (still) belong to a religious community, you have to confine your religious practices strictly to the private sphere?

This brings me to the topic of this contribution. The foregoing has shown that one of the most obvious effects of a globalising world is a strong increase in the number of new ways of life and of their diversity. At the same time the interdependency of the lives of people has increased dramatically as well; on many (technical, economical, social, political, cultural) levels our ways of life affect each other much more than before. This is but another aspect of a globalising society. With regard to religion, the question is how people with quite diverging religious and non-religious ways of life can live together peacefully and with respect for each other's substantial convictions and practices? However important it is that individual societies answer this question pragmatically, it also has to be dealt with on a more theoretical level, as pragmatic answers threaten to fail because these ways of life lack a common universe of discourse and practice, as we saw above. In my view, the way in which this issue should be dealt with differs considerably from the current postmodern approach, which is still quite popular. I think it essential to develop a new common ground, especially in the field of (religious) ways of life, however enormous this challenge is. The issue of common ground refers to an underlying theoretical question, that of (religious) truth, which traditionally belongs to philosophy of religion. Although this question seemed to have evaporated with the rise of the 'anything goes' of postmodernism, globalisation has put it back on the agenda

again. Of course, my answer to this enormous challenge can only be a modest and provisional one. The issue I am dealing with is not so much whether specific religious convictions or practices are true, but concerns a critical discussion of existing and possible new ways to approach the issue of religious truth. Given the globalisation of (religious) ways of life, which presuppositions have to be met so that people can discuss the truth of their ways of life with each other in a respectful way? I will first examine two popular, contrastive ways of dealing with religious truth: traditional theism and postmodern philosophy, and then present my own answer to this question.

The problems of theism: a 'foundationalist' idea of religious truth

In order to understand the nature and problems of theism, it is important to determine its specific origin and nature. It is not as old as Christian religion as such, but emerged at the beginning of modernity as an attempt to determine God's true nature and essential attributes in a purely philosophical manner. In a time of growing scepticism about the capacity of human reason to know truth at all, and especially God's nature, modern philosophy emerged. Having freed itself from its tutelage by (religious) tradition and theology, it was convinced of its capacity to lay a new, solid foundation for all true knowledge by universally implementing the method of mathematics, which had proven to be so successful in astronomy and physics. Descartes is one of the clearest promoters of this program. He considered his methodic doubt as the pre-eminent means to put an end to all contingent opinions and to lay once and for all a solid foundation for all true knowledge. This new philosophical method was also supposed to be able to prove the essential truths of Christian religion, viz. the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. In the dedication of his philosophical opus magnum, the *Meditations on*

first philosophy, to the professors of the theological faculty of the Parisian university he affirms that he has "always been of the opinion that the two questions respecting God and the Soul were the chief of those that ought to be determined by help of Philosophy rather than of Theology" (Descartes 1996: 1). Descartes' main argument for preferring philosophy to theology was that, while the latter was limited by faith, the former rests on reason alone. Therefore philosophy is much more suitable to persuade the infidels of the truth of Christian religion, since it can prove the latter's essential truths without any appeal to revealed faith. Although Descartes' 'theistic' approach to God's existence at first sight resembles that of Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa contra gentiles*, their views of the relation between faith and reason differ dramatically. All this shows that theism is not identical with Christian religious thinking as such, but has its specific origin in modern philosophy.[1]

Descartes' strictly philosophical approach to the existence of God implied a dramatic shift by comparison to the way in which this question was treated in pre-modern thinking. One only needs to compare Anselm's *Proslogion*, in which the ontological argument for God's existence is formulated for the first time, to Descartes' version of it in the fifth *Meditation*, whereas Anselm starts with praying for God's help to understand what is already revealed to him by faith.[2] Descartes' methodic doubt forces him to reject any appeal to revelation, thus stripping this argument completely of its religious nature. By doing so, Descartes turned the argument for God's

[1] For an historical survey of the origin and the development of the term 'Theism' cf. Dierse (1998: 1054ff).

[2] "For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand" Anselm (1968: 100).

existence into a strictly scientific proof, whose truth Descartes was convinced had the same certainty as mathematical truths.[3]

The Cartesian approach has proven to be paradigmatic for modern philosophy in general and its offsprings, among which theism belongs. Theism can be defined as the philosophical doctrine of the existence of a personal being who is the creator of the world, has a supreme intelligence and will, and is the source of all moral obligation. This doctrine is 'foundational' in the sense that every religious truth, pre-eminently the existence of God, has to be deduced from a limited number of self-evident, universally accepted principles. Thus, religious foundationalism is the consequence of the application of the paradigm of the 'mathesis universalis' to religious truth.[4] This means that theism is characterised by a kind of philosophical 'take-over' of Christian faith, thus giving a very specific interpretation to the traditional Christian idea of the connection between faith and reason, which, as such, has always been the key to any debate about religious truth, both in pre-modern and in modern thinking.

Due to modernity's focus on foundational and epistemological questions, other traditional subjects of Christian thinking, such as revelation, the narratives of the Bible, sacraments, spirituality, the church and so forth became far less important. As a child of modernity, theism wanted to present itself as a strictly philosophical doctrine in order to have a common debating ground with secular reason and its products, scepticism and atheism. Consequently it is no wonder that, as modern culture came more and more under the spell

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[3] "The existence of God would pass with me for a truth at least as certain as I ever judged any truth of mathematics to be" Descartes (1996: 65f).

[4] I use the term 'foundationalism' as a characterisation of modern philosophy. It therefore has to be clearly distinguished from 'fundamentalism', which stands for the tendency of some religious communities to interpret their holy texts (the Bible or the Koran) literally and univocally.

of scientific reason, theism, reinforcing its 'foundational' and epistemological character, became generally accepted as the most suitable instance to defend the truth of religion, not only in confrontation with secularist philosophy, but also with the natural sciences. Especially in the Enlightenment, theism accepted the challenge to justify religion to the tribunal of reason. Crucial 'theistic' questions in this respect are: can God's existence be proven in a way that can stand the test of a comparison with mathematics or natural sciences? Are the insights of theism in accordance with natural sciences, especially with theoretical physics (as far as the creation of the universe is concerned) and biology (when the spiritual nature of man is at stake)?

In spite of its reputation of intellectual rigour and the seriousness with which it examined the results of science, with regard to their metaphysical implications and presuppositions, the theistic way of dealing with religious truth has also been severely criticised by many philosophers, ever since its emergence. The comparison between Anselm and Descartes with regard to the ontological argument already shows some problematic aspects of theism. Similar problems result from a comparison between Thomas Aquinas and modern theism. Each of the famous 'five ways' of Thomas Aquinas, being his answer to the question of whether God's existence can be proven by reason, concludes with the phrase: "This is what all call God" (Aquinas 1952: quest. 2, art. 3). By doing so, Thomas in fact equated the results of these five arguments, viz. the unmoved mover, the first efficient cause, the necessary being, the ultimate cause of perfection, the intelligent end of all natural things, with the living God of Christian religion. For Thomas, as with Anselm, these arguments were embedded in a global religious frame of reference[5], and played only a

[5] The medieval worldview can be characterised best by the word 'ordo' (order), encompassing the whole of being, viz. both the supra-natural and the natural. Of

subordinate role in their thinking, whereas the same arguments had a more crucial function in philosophical theism, as it sought to use these arguments to provide the natural sciences with a solid, metaphysical foundation, and simultaneously to firmly fix the existence of God in the modern, scientific worldview. But with the rise of theism, serious doubts about this approach arose. Apart from the fact that the cogency of the theistic arguments for God's existence were repudiated by philosophers like Hume and Kant, other philosophers asked whether the rationalistic, foundationalist approach of theism was the best way to defend the truth of Christian religion. One can call to mind Pascal's famous phrase, sewed in his doublet: "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob—Not of philosophers or the wise" (Pascal 1904–14: 12). But one can also refer to Jacobi's saying that the interest of philosophical science is, there be no God (Jacobi 2000: 96), or more recently to Heidegger's deconstruction of the onto-theological character and of the principle of sufficient reason in modern metaphysics, culminating in his remark that man is incapable of praying to or sacrificing for the *causa sui* [literally self-caused], which he considers to be the essence of the theistic concept of God (Heidegger 1957: 64).

Another illustrative critique of the foundational character of modernity, which in a way foreshadows the postmodern way of dealing with the question of religious truth, comes from the contemporary German philosopher Odo Marquard. He criticises the propensity of modern culture to justify all kinds of things by summoning them before the tribunal of reason, even the most contingent aspects of life. In line with the sceptical character of his

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course, God is both the principle and the end of this order, but nevertheless He essentially belongs to it, and is by no means separated from it. Therefore, in the eyes of the medieval mind it was unthinkable to completely separate (philosophical) thinking of the world from its divine origin and end.

philosophy, he criticises foundationalism by questioning, in a humorous way, our habit of looking for justifications for all sorts of things:

> Nowadays, there is a general tendency to force everybody and everything to justify themselves. Everyone has to enter into a 'context of justification'—its most luxurious shape is the so-called 'dominant-free discourse'—and has to justify him or herself, especially when one is stuck in a crisis of justification. And this seems everywhere to be the case nowadays—in an era that is readily called post-conventional. And if somewhere there might not be a crisis of justification yet, it is necessarily invented for the sake of the general propagation of the desire to justify oneself. Apparently, everything has to be justified nowadays: the family, the state, causality, the individual, chemistry, vegetables, hair growth, one's temper, life, culture, the swimming trunks. In fact, there is only one thing that does not need to be justified: the exigency of a justification for everything and everyone. But why is this so? When I—in an attempt to be polite—introduce myself by saying: 'Allow me to introduce myself: Marquard', then the normal answer seems to be: 'Without justification nothing at all is allowed here! Justify yourself! What gives you the right to be Marquard, such as you are, and not someone completely else? And with what right are you at all, rather than not-being?' This climate of the need for justification is a phenomenon, that has to be recognised and named, and because it turns everything in a certain sense into a tribunal, I call it the tribunalisation of the modern social environment (Marquard 2003: 124).

This quotation illustrates the embarrassment many faithful feel, when they are called to account for their being faithful. The main reason for this embarrassment is that they are forced to justify themselves even before they have spoken a word or performed any action, and have to respect the codes and rules, which were decreed without their consent. In spite of its self-created image of reasonableness and absence of

coercion, the modern discourse of justification has brought about its own mechanisms of power. It is especially those elements of modern culture that seemed to lack justification, such as revealed religion (as opposed to rational or natural religion), that are treated with an unusual degree of contempt. The unreasonableness of this seemingly rational demand for justification is quite obvious: apart from the fact that this discourse of justification is unable to justify itself, one can ask whether it is reasonable to expect people to justify their lives before they have started to live? Although this thesis seems ridiculous, one only has to keep in mind the concrete example of parents, who are expected to justify their decision to have their newly born child baptised, to show that it is all but theoretical.

As far as theism is concerned, all these criticisms point in the same direction: due to its specific, that is rationalistic and foundational character, something essential has been lost in this attempt to grasp the truth of religion. One can legitimately ask whether theism really has succeeded in thinking the truth of *religion* as a concrete way of life. Can the abstract, metaphysical concepts of theism really serve as a foundation for and minimal content of the living God of Christian religion? Isn't the committed, existential relation of the faithful towards God of a totally different nature than the neutral, theoretical relation of a philosopher towards the metaphysical absolute or of a scientist with regard to his theoretical assumptions? Moreover, one can doubt whether theism's specific interpretation of the relation between faith and reason is adequate: doesn't theism in fact supersede faith with reason? Finally, in the course of its development, theism itself became affected more and more by the scientific approach it was dependant on: as science gradually became more dominated by mathematics, theism often took a similar formalistic approach, thus appearing eventually as a kind of higher mathematical science about God.

Scientists, from their side, criticised the hidden religious agenda of theism. They considered theistic reason as unable to meet the normal scientific standards of objectivity, open-mindedness to new experiential data and theoretical insights that might disprove the theistic hypothesis. Because theism made the impression of not being prepared to *seriously* call into question its basic assumption—the existence of God, it gradually became less accepted as a serious discussion-partner by science, especially as, in the course of the 20th century, the development of the latter's theoretical insights about the origin and evolution of the universe seemed to be less and less reconcilable with the religious belief in God as the personal creator of the world.

All these developments contributed to theism's loss of plausibility as a viable way to discuss the truth of religion, not only in contemporary philosophy, but also in religious circles. From the perspective of philosophy of culture the most serious problems facing theism are themselves a consequence of the growing uneasiness with the project of enlightened reason as such, in particular: its disenchanting effects upon our social environment, its contribution to the domination of instrumental reason to the detriment of other spheres of human existence, and last but not least its foundationalism, which abstracted too much from the fact that religion is first of all a way of life. In sum, just as the rise of theism was the effect of the emergence of modern, scientific reason, its decline also reflects the problems that this specific form of rationality has run into. Therefore, the basic Christian idea of the relation between faith and reason has to be developed in ways other than theism did in order to discuss religious truth philosophically.

Postmodernism and the evaporation of religious truth

In general, the critique of the foundationalist nature of modern reason, including theism, is characteristic of postmodern philosophy. This raises the question of which alternative approach it suggests, in particular with regard to the idea of religious truth. It is important to note right from the start that postmodernism is not only an influential trend in contemporary philosophy, but also is an umbrella term for a popular attitude in contemporary society with regard to the existing diversity in ways of life. In the introduction of this contribution I used the term 'bricolage' to characterise the eclecticism of postmodernism. However, in this section I will discuss the way in which postmodern philosophy deals with the question of religious truth conceptually.

Let us start by examining how a very influential postmodern philosopher like Rorty answers this question. According to him, modern foundationalism has appeared to fall short of expectations because it proved unable to represent nature objectively, as if philosophy were the mirror of nature (Rorty 1983). This means that the idea of objective knowledge, being the key to every kind of foundationalism, has lost its sense, and thus also the notion of objective truth. Giving up the hope of founding our basic thoughts upon objective reality means the end of modern, foundationalist philosophy, including theism: no (religious) conviction or tradition can legitimately claim to be objectively true. Instead, they are but contingent 'final vocabularies'; their truth cannot be demonstrated 'objectively', but only with circular arguments whose strength does not reach beyond the persons or communities using this vocabulary. Since the collapse of theism, which during modernity had served as a common universe of discourse, an objective meta-vocabulary, humans can no longer weigh the truth claims of different (religious) vocabularies against each other. This situation inevitably leads to an attitude of irony: ironists are

> never quite able to take themselves seriously because [they are] always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves (Rorty 1999: 73f),

that is, the contingency and fragility of who they actually are. They put this into practice by continually redescribing themselves, society, and the world in ever new ways; that is, by constantly re-creating themselves without referring to any normative eternal examples, like God, the Absolute, reason, truth etc. Consequently, the ironist dismisses any reasonable discussion about (religious) ways of life, because they are purely contingent, subjective preferences. As such, it does not make any sense at all to claim their truth.

However, according to Rorty, the ironist is a pathological figure (1991: 203), since he is constantly in doubt as to whether he hasn't been raised in the 'wrong' language-game, and inclined to give up his vocabulary in favour of another. Because all vocabularies are equally contingent, there is no end to this search, so that the ironist never finds peace in any vocabulary. Consequently, the ironist runs the risk of not belonging to anything anymore, of completely loosing his identity. He can only avoid this risk by devoting himself to the vocabulary he is familiar with and consequently he simply declares that there are limits to what he can take seriously (Rorty 1991: 187f). In sum, we are fully entitled to be attached to (religious) traditions, although we are at the same time aware of the fact that they cannot make any claim to truth. Therefore, ethnocentrism is the inevitable consequence of Rorty's postmodernism.

The way in which postmodern philosophy suggests dealing with the existing divergence in ways of life is quite appealing to contemporary people: the lack, experienced by many, of a common ground for publicly discussing diverging ways of life rationally leads them to all kinds of pragmatic solutions, which mostly come down to an

individually inspired eclecticism. From this perspective, religion is good if it enables me to have: interesting experiences, insofar as it can make me happy, contributes to my mental and even physical health, helps me in finding the meaning of life, inspires and motivates me in my private and public life, promotes peace and social justice. In this way, religion is being reduced to its benefit for the individual and society. It only has a meaning insofar as it appeals to *me*, insofar as it can be integrated into *my* individual way of realising myself. Thus, religion is a part of the lifestyle-goods for sale on the market and promoted by the media. Only those elements of religious traditions that the creative individual can fit into his or her postmodern lifestyle are welcomed. Consequently, the very idea of religious truth, as contrasted with heresy, superstition, bigotry and the like, has evaporated; religion is no longer a matter of true substantial meanings, values and practices, but of the beneficial effects people try to reach through it. Religious traditions are not appreciated because of the truth embedded in them but only insofar they serve as a gold mine for the religious 'bricoleur'. Religious elements that do not fit into this scheme like: moral values that run counter to the generally accepted secular, liberal morals; religiously inspired prescripts in clothing and other conspicuous religious symbols that make us feel a bit uneasy, are often treated with misunderstanding or contempt, and anyhow have to be banned as much as possible from public life.

I find this evaporation of the whole idea of the truth of (religious) ways of life, and its disappearance from public discourse quite problematic. In fact, it leads to a situation in which we are entitled to stick to our curious convictions and funny habits, as long as their expression remains confined to the private sphere. They are not allowed to interfere with public life, which has to stay as neutral as possible in order not to offend other people's ways of life. Let us examine whether giving up the whole idea of (religious) truth and its disappearance from public discourse is a viable option.

When Rorty calls an ironical attitude towards our final vocabularies 'pathological' and considers that humans are entitled to stick to the vocabulary they are familiar with, he is pointing at an interesting aspect of our ways of life: in spite of our cherished idea of multicultural open-mindedness most of us are substantially attached to all kinds of contingent and parochial habits, traditions, and practices. Many of our daily habits, from the kind of food we prefer to our morning or evening rituals, belong to this category. We usually perform them unconsciously, and we only realise the substantial character of our attachment to them when we have to forego them for some time. The substantial character of some of our attachments becomes even clearer if we look at our attachment to our native language. As the word 'native' already indicates, it is the language we are most familiar with in the sense that it enables us to express and share our deepest thoughts and emotions. We experience this most clearly when, staying abroad, we feel somewhat hampered while communicating with others on a deeper level than the usual 'airport information'. Immigrants and people belonging to a linguistic minority are also painfully aware of this handicap in everyday life, and of the social and economic discrimination resulting from it.

However, although we are substantially attached to our daily habits and native language, nobody seriously wants to lay claim to their truth. The substantial attachment to our native language does not at all mean that it is more 'true' or superior in comparison to other languages. On the contrary, all attempts to upgrade our substantial attachment in such a way lead to oppressing those who have other substantial attachments. Take for example the ancient Greeks, who underscored their pretension to 'linguistic superiority' by calling foreigners barbarians, thereby disqualifying the language of these foreigners as 'jabber'. This clearly shows how essential it is to realise that the objects of many of our substantial attachments are contingent, and have to remain so. It prevents us from imposing them

on others, since this would imply an illegitimate violation of their personal integrity. So far, I agree with Rorty's analysis of the substantial attachment to all kinds of contingent vocabularies, and also with his conclusion that taking an ironical attitude towards them is no option.

My problems with the postmodern position begin when we try to answer the following crucial question: Does the pragmatic attitude with regard to our attachment to the variety of final vocabularies hold true for all our substantial attachments, such as our attachment to democracy, human rights, social justice, and the position of women in society? Does it make as little sense to speak of their truth as it does to speak of the truth of our daily habits or native language? Are the ideals of truth and justice nothing more than a social construction of a like minded local community, having no meaning at all for other people not belonging to this group? My point is that the meaning of such basic notions as truth and justice is not confined to the private sphere of a local club or 'ethnos', but has a transcendent dimension.

In order to show this, I first want to query Rorty's idea of a strict separation between the private and the public sphere. He somehow misses the point of what it means to people that some of their substantial attachments find public recognition as being true or just on reasonable grounds. As Charles Taylor (1991) has made clear, every process of recognition is situated against the background of what really counts as essential, valuable, true or just. It is impossible for the individual to decide this all by himself, because the use of these categories refers *per se* to a sphere that transcends an individual opinion or decision. That is why recognition usually takes the form of a public judgement, based upon the result of public debate, the order of things, or the nature of human beings. To give an example: when Islamic women claim the right to wear a scarf outdoors, they not so much claim the individual right to differ from other women, but want

society to publicly recognise that the Islamic way to express the position of women in relation to men is of equal value as the Western liberal view on women in public life. Although wearing a scarf seems to be an outstanding example of Rorty's idea of a substantial attachment to something completely contingent, it actually is an expression of a fundamental value regarding the position of women in public life, and its public recognition is necessary to allow this value to come 'true'.

Some expressions of truth and justice are even universally recognised, as is the case with the *universal* declaration of human rights. However inadequate its concrete phrasing is, in the sense that it needs to be refined and adapted to new insights and debates, the fact that this declaration is qualified as universal refers to a transcendent idea of truth and justice, of what essentially belongs to human dignity and a truly humane society. Because of its universality this declaration claims to transcend the many existing final vocabularies of local communities. Moreover, this universality serves as a point of orientation for what has to be recognised on a more local level.

Among many things, recognition inevitably implies *unequal* recognition, as some convictions and practices are considered as more truthful, valuable, or just than others. An equal recognition of any conviction or practice whatsoever would put an end to the whole idea of recognition, just as attributing royal honour to everyone would make such an honour worthless.

The striving for recognition does not necessarily mean that others have to adopt our substantial commitments for the orientation of their own lives. This would be a denial of the inevitable dissemination of our lives, and consequently of the real divergence of our substantial commitments as they are embodied in the contingency of our concrete existence as finite human beings. It is an illusion to expect that this real divergence of substantial (religious) commitments can

eventually be superseded by a peaceful dialogue between (religious) ways of life or by waiting for their eschatological fusion. On the contrary, the striving for recognition of the truth of diverging ways of life often appears as a painful confrontation of irreconcilable practices. But nevertheless, the process of striving for recognition shows that there is something essential at stake: others ask us to recognise that their substantial commitments to their ways of life are attempts to express something essential and of equal value to our own expressions of our substantial commitments, although we may not share their commitments and they may even fill us with repulsion. One could even say that the process of recognition can only take place against the background of conflicting substantial meanings, because only then are all partners in this process aware of the fact that there is something essential at stake. Therefore, we feel deeply frustrated when others don't want to take our substantial meanings seriously, and reduce them to contingent, private opinions whose acceptance does not rest upon their substance, but merely upon their private character, and dependant on them not causing too much trouble.

This reasoning shows that we depend on a public and sometimes even universal recognition of the value of many of our substantial attachments. In the end, we don't want to be left alone with our contingent convictions and practices, nor are we prepared to leave others alone with theirs. We humans are too dependent on recognition by others of our substantial meanings to seriously consider ourselves as the only creators of truth and meaning in a meaningless world. Admitting this conclusion implies that we always make use of substantial notions like truth and justice, and that by doing so, we claim that they transcend the level of a social construction by local communities.

An even more 'substantial' argument against the postmodern evaporation of the idea of truth has to do with the finiteness of our

lives. The existential doubt of many postmodern people as to whether they haven't been raised in the wrong 'final vocabulary', eventually making them insane, not only makes their pragmatic decision to stick to the contingent way of life they are familiar with plausible, as Rorty argues, but also illustrates something else, which goes counter to Rorty's view: nobody seriously wants to devote his or her life completely to things that in the end turn out to be futile. In particular this has to do with tension between the inevitable temporariness of our lives as corporeal beings and the transcendent meanings we aim at as spiritual beings. If every option we take could endlessly be reconsidered, we wouldn't be affected by existential anxiety at all; nor if we were only material beings, radically confined to the here and now. But we know all too well what is done cannot be undone, especially when, in the case of concrete, practical decisions, we become painfully aware of the meaning of the saying that you can't have it both ways. In all these cases, Rorty's suggestion of pragmatic solutions to avoid this anxiety does not suffice. As an illustration of the impact of the tension between the temporariness of life and the transcendence of meaning upon the behaviour of humans, one only needs to refer to perhaps the most substantial attachment people have, the one of parents to their children. As they of course want to give their children the best education they can, they not only look for pragmatic answers in regard to how to raise their children, but also ask themselves much more fundamental or transcendental questions; the latter eventually come down to what a 'good' education implies, which inevitably is also an education aimed at the good. The fact that most parents ask themselves these questions, and that they feel existentially devastated if their children go astray, surely does not mean that they suffer from a kind of 'metaphysical disease', as Rorty suggests. On the contrary, it shows their mental health, as they realise that their substantial commitment to their children also implies that they teach them substantial values. The fact that the truth-value of

vocabularies about education or the value of different ways of educating one's children cannot be weighed against each other objectively does prevent people from looking for what is essential, valuable or just.

An existential approach of religious truth

The shortcomings of both the theistic and the postmodern answers to the question of religious truth make it necessary to try an alternative road and to examine whether it brings us further. A preliminary step is to answer the question, raised by postmodern philosophy, of whether religion, in spite of its self-image, belongs to the category of contingent matters, alongside our daily habits or native language. If so, my critique of Rorty's position in the previous section would have missed the point as to whether it makes sense to speak of *religious* truth. It cannot be denied that religion, both on a cultural and a personal level, is partly the result of all kinds of contingent elements. One has only to keep in mind the history of all religions, being full of contingencies, and the importance of education and other forms of religious socialisation to a person's faith. However, especially in a society in which being religious is becoming less and less self evident, many faithful consider that they commit their lives to something substantially true, transcending the contingent convictions of a local community. Essentially, this is because Christianity—as well as many other religions—is a religion of conversion: Christians orient their lives by placing themselves under the sign of the risen Christ. In spite of all the contingent reasons that have led them to this orientation, they do not consider their faith as a contingent option, but are convinced that Christ is their Saviour, since he is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14: 6). This involves a promise of salvation that not only counts for the individual Christian, but is true for all people. Through a variety of concrete experiences, behaviours and ways of thinking, the faithful bear testimony to this fundamental truth of their

faith. Outstanding examples of this are the martyrs: the original meaning of this (Greek) word is someone who publicly testifies to the truth of their faith, if necessary at the cost of their lives. But even in more ordinary situations, the dynamics of personal conversion make it clear that people experience their religious way of life as something substantial, belonging to a different category from contingent daily habits and native language. Especially when they form a religious minority, people usually are sharply aware of this.

But the fact that people are so deeply convinced of the truth of their (religious) ways of life that some of them are even prepared to give their lives for it is as such not a sufficient reason for their truth. First of all, there is the question of how a religious community deals with the truth of its tradition. I would suggest calling this kind of discussion an immanent one, because both its active participants and its addressees are primarily members of a specific religious community. Every religion consists of heterogeneous stories, teachings and rituals, which highlight specific elements of its truth. It is of vital importance that a religious community, or at least their spiritual and intellectual leaders, somehow clarify the relation between these elements. This also implies that they have to keep the true spirit of their religious tradition alive by (re-)interpreting its meaning in the light of the times, and ask for its (practical) meaning. Finally, as all humans, including the faithful, are intellectually and morally finite beings, and thus may err, it is essential for a religious community to examine whether it is still faithful to its original inspiration, and hasn't lost the right track in the course of history.

However, especially in a globalising world, in which various religious and non-religious worldviews make exclusive claims to truth, and in which we experience daily that not all of them have a salutary effect on humanity, it is essential to find ways to also discuss religious truth on a transcendent level, one that is also intelligible for people not

belonging to this or that (religious) community. Of course this transcendent discussion is a very complicated one, since discussing the truth of deviant ways of life often appears as a painful confrontation of irreconcilable ideas and practices. But in my view, this is the only option remaining. The postmodern idea that every individual or community has its right to its own final vocabulary as long as it does not affect the others, evidently has reached its limits because of the growing interdependence of people and societies. This is where the kind of philosophy of religion I propose in this essay comes into play. Contrary to postmodern philosophy, it has the idea of religious truth as its central focus, but approaches it from an existential perspective. By taking this approach, it is opposed to theism as well, which often has laid religion on the procrustean bed of an abstract, rationalistic determination of its truth. My suggestion is that philosophy of religion takes (elements of) a concrete religious way of life as its point of departure and reveal the truth embedded in it.

In order to clarify what I mean by such an approach, I give a concrete example, the prayer for forgiveness in the Our Father: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6: 12). Christians are substantially and personally committed to this prayer, not only because it is taught by Christ himself, but also because it expresses a personal involvement with regard to this aspect of the existential truth of the Christian way of life: forgiveness essentially qualifies both the vertical relation of God towards humans, and the horizontal relation of humans towards each other.

A first element of the existential truth of this prayer becomes manifest if one links it to the dynamics of human morality, especially the relationship between norms and values. In common parlance these terms are often used indiscriminately. Nevertheless it is essential to distinguish them and determine their relation more precisely. Usually

norms appear as obligations: thou shall not kill, thou shall not give false witness, and also, thou shall forgive thy debtor. However, if these norms are only seen as moral obligations, they run the risk of remaining a dead letter, because the positive value, for the sake of which we have to obey this moral rule, becomes concealed. Therefore, it is important to fill out such norms with concrete experiences of the good, which show that it really is valuable to obey these norms. So, if the obligatory character of norms is to remain effective, they have to be linked to the experience of the positive value, that forgiveness makes the world a better place to live in. In the history of philosophy, Kant, whose categorical imperative usually counts as the culmination of a morality of obligation, was very well aware of the need to complete it by his theory of the supreme good, being the ultimate end of all moral actions.[6]

This anthropological argument for the existential truth of forgiveness, however, does not prove why the *religious* commandment to forgive would be true. Essentially, the prayer for forgiveness shows that the horizontal moral obligation to forgive one's debtor is connected to a vertical dimension, the beneficial experience that our existence, however sinful it may be, is basically accepted by God's grace. Especially because Christians believe that God is their heavenly father, and thus transcends the vicissitudes that characterise all human relations, they know that they can count on his promise of gracefully accepting their existence: God mercifully forgives our debts against him, which are infinitely greater. This inspires Christians even to do the unthinkable—to forgive the unforgivable. In other words, the basic experience that our sinful existence is being accepted by God makes it legitimate that he demands from us, not to forgive our brothers and sisters seven times, "but seventy times seven times" (Matthew 18: 21). Thus, the truth of the prayer for forgiveness is the

[6] I develop this issue further Jonkers (2000: 132f).

essential connection of a horizontal and a vertical dimension: the experience of God's grace, that is the vertical dimension of the prayer for forgiveness, is essential for the horizontal obligation to forgive our debtors. This analysis shows a way in which philosophy of religion can help in making the prayer for forgiveness, expressing an existential religious truth, intelligible to other people by linking it to the general structure of human morality.

The prayer for forgiveness, expressing a double but asymmetrical relation towards God on the one hand, and towards our neighbours on the other, also expresses another aspect of religious truth, viz. that it can be put to the test, albeit in a different way than in theism. It goes without saying that lots of counter examples can be given of (religious) people refusing to forgive each other, and even of God refusing forgiveness to his people (for example when God punishes the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their indecent behaviour). However, they don't falsify the truth of our religious commitment in the foundationalist sense of the word. But does this mean that faith in the truth of forgiveness is blind? No, it *can* be put to the test, but only on an existential level, when our Christian way of life is at stake. I once heard a story of a man who returned from a concentration camp after the Second World War. Even after his return, he was unable to pray the Our Father, especially the prayer for forgiveness, no matter how hard he tried. He was overwhelmed with bitterness and hatred. Apparently, his Christian way of life, implying the faith in a merciful God who forgives our trespasses and asks us to do the same to our neighbours, had been so deeply put to the test that he could not forgive the Nazis for their terrible atrocities, and thus could not commit himself anymore to forgiving his neighbours after the war. Suddenly, a woman rushed into the man's house, crying out that fellow villagers were going to bury her son alive for having collaborated with the Nazis. "You are the only person, who can save my child", she begged. The man stood up, went to the scene where the

burial was taking place, and said to the executioners: "If you go on burying this boy alive, I will jump into the hole to be buried with him". They looked at him, wondering whether he really meant it, and stopped throwing sand on the boy's body. And so the man saved the boy's life and regained his faith.

This story shows how an existential religious truth can be put to the test. For the man in question, the experience of the war served as a dramatic counterexample of the truth of his faith, in particular his capacity to forgive those who had committed atrocities during the war. However, it turns out that the existential nature of putting to the test this religious truth differs considerably from the alleged neutrality and objectivity of theism. Similarly, the man did not regain his faith as a result of some theological exposé about whether God was or wasn't present in Auschwitz, but because of an existential experience where, by saving someone else's life through forgiving him, he was also able to save his own life, since being filled with hatred implies that one has stopped living from the very moment that an unforgivable deed is inflicted. A contingent experience, however painful and unjust it may be, is turned into something absolute.

In sum, the philosophical analysis of the prayer for forgiveness shows how an existential truth, which is essential to a Christian way of life, not only regards a community of faithful, but also expresses an essential quality of human relations as such.

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with the question of how to speak about religious truth in a globalising world. Firstly, it has become clear that theism is not the most adequate approach to religious truth. The main reason for this pertains to the foundationalist interpretation of the relation between faith and reason. This implied that theism took a very rationalistic turn and abstracted from religion as a way of life; besides,

against the conviction of Descartes and so many philosophers after him, theism's discussions with the sciences turned out to be relatively unsuccessful. If one accepts these conclusions, it means that one has to answer the question of religious truth on a less abstract, propositional level, and take a more existential approach, one that seeks to philosophise about the truth of religion on the concrete level of people placing their lives under the sign of the risen Christ. Secondly, it also has become clear that the postmodern suggestion of giving up the idea of truth altogether and replacing it with a pragmatic approach eventually fails, at least in those fields of human existence that matter on a fundamental level, such as human rights, social justice and other essential values and truths, including religious ones. Thirdly, the effects of globalisation make us aware of the fact that we no longer get away with pragmatic answers to these fundamental questions, let alone the 'anything goes' mentality, however popular they still are in contemporary postmodern society. A globalising society, characterised by a qualitative and quantitative increase in religious diversity and the inevitable tensions resulting from it, cannot permit itself the luxury anymore of letting the idea of the truth of (religious) ways of life to evaporate. This gives a practical urgency to the issue of religious truth.

If philosophers of religion want to try the existential approach to religious truth, they first of all need to be familiar with what a religious way of life means, just like philosophers of art are required to have some familiarity with art. By accepting this condition, they somehow continue the pre-modern tradition of faithful thinking, of faith searching for understanding, albeit in a totally different context than the one of Anselm, who was one of its founding fathers. This difference primarily concerns the dominance of secular ways of life and the growing presence of non-Christian religious traditions. They make the position of contemporary religious philosophers look similar to the one of the apostle Paul on the Areopage. Just as Paul had

to explain the truth of the Christian way of life to epicurean and stoic philosophers, who did not at all share his basic convictions, the task of contemporary philosophers of religion is also to explain the substantially true in the religious way of life they are familiar with, as reasonably as possible, so that it is also intelligible to people not sharing it.

But such an existential approach to religious truth can only be successful if philosophy is aware of some theoretical presuppositions, and discusses them critically on a meta-level. Due to lack of space and time I will only indicate them here briefly. First, this approach depends on the conviction that something essential or substantially true is indeed embodied in all kinds of concrete ways of life, both religious and secular. Since philosophy has taken an existential perspective as its point of departure, there is no possibility of proving this presupposition on a neutral, external level, as I showed in the previous section. This problem, which is an aspect of the hermeneutical circle, is an inevitable consequence of the non-foundational character of any existential approach. We just don't have an a priori, objective standard at our disposal, with the help of which the substantial truth of a (religious) way of life could be determined unambiguously. We can only solve this problem a posteriori, by bringing this method into practice, and spending all our expertise on philosophically explaining the essence of a (religious) way of life, thus making it as strong and convincing as possible, also with consideration for people not belonging to this or that specific religious tradition. The second presupposition is that philosophy is able to set up a critical discussion of the diverging truths, embedded in various (religious) ways of life. In order to do so, it has to transcend from hermeneutics to metaphysics, from a contextual analysis of religious truths to their meaning for human existence as such. From the perspective of contemporary philosophy, which usually takes a very critical attitude towards any kind of metaphysical thinking, this

presupposition is the most hazardous one. However, the kind of metaphysics I have in mind here are much more modest than modern, foundational, theistic metaphysics. It does not abstract from all particularity, thus producing only an abstract essence, but looks for the essential *in* the particular. Thirdly, especially in a globalising world, it is essential that philosophers from various religious backgrounds participate in this discussion. Here, the advantage of an existential approach to religious truth is the most clear. It is commonly known that, in comparison to other religious traditions, Christianity, due to its history, has a very strong philosophical character and a long tradition of discussing its truth with secular reason. Consequently, other religions run the risk of being in a disadvantaged position right from the start in their capacity to engage with secular reason. In this situation, taking concrete elements of religious ways of life as a point of departure does not force these religions to participate in a rationalistic, foundationalist discussion they are not familiar with and perhaps even consider as totally inadequate to explain religious truth. In my view, one of the most intriguing challenges for philosophy of religion in a globalising world is to develop such an existential approach of religious truth, and by doing so discover if and how these three presuppositions are sound.

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